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Jewish eugenics, and other essays : three

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JEWISH EUGENICS

A PAPER READ BEFORE THE
NEW YORK BOARD OF JEWISH MINISTERS

BY

RABBI MAX REICHLER, B. A.



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JEWISH EUGENICS

Who knows the cause of Israel's survival? Why did the Jew survive the onslaughts of Time, when others, numerically and politically stronger, succumbed? Obedience to the Law of Life, declares the modern student of eugenics, was the saving quality which rendered the Jewish race immune from disease and destruction. "The Jews, ancient and modern," says Dr. Stanton Coit, "have always understood the science of eugenics, and have governed themselves in accordance with it; hence the preservation of the Jewish race."¹

I. Jewish Attitude

To be sure eugenics as a science could hardly have existed among the ancient Jews; but many eugenic rules were certainly incorporated in the large collection of Biblical and Rabbinical laws. Indeed there are clear indications of a conscious effort to utilize all influences that might improve the inborn qualities of the Jewish race, and to guard against any practice that might vitiate the purity of

¹Cf. also *Social Direction of Human Evolution*, by Prof. William E. Kellicott, 1911, p. 231.

the race, or "impair the racial qualities of future generations" either physically, mentally, or morally.² The Jew approached the matter of sex relationship neither with the horror of the prude, nor with the passionate eagerness of the pagan, but with the sane and sound attitude of the far-seeing prophet. His goal was the creation of the ideal home, which to him meant the abode of purity and happiness, the source of strength and vigor for body and mind.³

II. Home of the Pure Bloods

The very founder of the Jewish race, the patriarch Abraham, recognized the importance of certain inherited qualities, and insisted that the wife of his "only beloved son" should not come from "the daughters of the Canaanites," but from the seed of a superior stock.⁴

In justifying this seemingly narrow view of our patriarch, one of the Rabbis significantly suggests: "Even if the wheat of your own clime does not appear to be of the best, its seeds will prove more productive than others not suitable to that particular soil."⁵

This contention is eugenically correct. Davenport tells of a settlement worker of this city who made

²Sir Francis Galton defines eugenics as "the science which deals with all influences that improve the inborn qualities of the race."

³Cf. Ps. cxxviii, 3-4. The National Conference on Race Betterment which met recently at Battle Creek declared that "the core of race betterment consists in promoting more and better homes."

⁴Gen. xxiv, 3-4.

⁵Ber. Rabbah 59, 11.

special inquiry concerning a certain unruly and criminally inclined section of his territory, and found that the offenders came from one village in Calabria, known as "the home of the brigands."⁶ Just as there is a home of the brigands, so there may be "a home of the pure bloods."

Eugenists also claim that though consanguineous marriages are in most cases injurious to the progeny, yet where relatives possess "valuable characters, whether apparent or not, marriages between them might be encouraged, as a means of rendering permanent a rare and valuable family trait, which might otherwise be much less likely to become an established characteristic."⁷ Abraham's servant, Eliezer, so the Midrash states, desired to offer his own daughter to Isaac, but his master sternly rebuked him, saying: "Thou art cursed, and my son is blessed, and it does not behoove the cursed to mate with the blessed, and thus deteriorate the quality of the race."⁸

III. Early Marriages

The aim of eugenics is to encourage the reproduction of the good and "blessed" human protoplasm and the elimination of the impure and

⁶*Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, by Charles B. Davenport, New York, 1911, p. 183.

⁷*Social Direction of Human Evolution*, p. 154; *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, p. 185. The Biblical expression "a bone of my bones" (Gen. ii, 23), refers, according to the Rabbis, to a man who marries one of his relatives. (Bereshith Rabbah 18, 5). The marriage between uncle and niece is also recommended (Yebamoth 63b).

⁸Ber. Rabbah 59, 12; cf. Gen. ix, 25-26.

"cursed" human protoplasm. According to Francis Galton, it is "to check the birthrate of the unfit, and to further the productivity of the fit by early marriages and the rearing of healthful children."

The Rabbis may or may not have had such a definite purpose in mind, but their Halachic legislation and Haggadic observations naturally tended to bring about the same results. Early marriages were praised as most desirable. Rabbi Ishmael claimed that God was greatly displeased with the man who did not marry before the age of twenty.⁹ Rav Hunah refused to see Rav Hamnuna, a man of great repute (*adam gadol*), after the former discovered that his visitor was a bachelor.¹⁰ "He who is not married," runs a Talmudic saying, "is destitute of all joy, blessing, and happiness."¹¹ "He has no conception of the sweetness of life";¹² indeed "he cannot be regarded as a man at all."¹³

IV. Reproduction

Among the seven types not acceptable before God are included both the unmarried man and the married man without children.¹⁴ A man without children experiences death in life,¹⁵ and surely deserves our pity when he departs from this earth.¹⁶

⁹Kiddushin 29b.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Midrash Lekach Tob, Gen. 2, ed. Buber p. 21.

¹²Ber. Rabbah ch. 17.

¹³Yalkut Gen. ii, 23.

¹⁴Pesachim 113b.

¹⁵Nedarim 64b.

¹⁶M. K. 27b.

For only he is dead who leaves no son behind to continue his work, while he who leaves even one worthy son is not really dead but merely sleeps.¹⁷ He who does not contribute his share to the reproduction of the race, reduces the divine type,¹⁸ causes the Shechinah to depart from Israel,¹⁹ and is guilty of murder.²⁰ The duty of reproduction is incumbent on all, both young and old.²¹

The Rabbis, like the eugenists of to-day, measured the success of a marriage by the number and quality of the offspring. In their judgments the main objects of marriage were the reproduction of the human race (*leshem piryah veribyah*), and the augmentation of the favored stock (*lethikun havlad*).²² Hence they advised that an extremely tall man should not marry an extremely tall woman, lest the children be awkwardly tall; nor should one of short stature marry a woman of the same size, lest their offspring be dwarfed. For the same reason, the intermarriage between blonds or between dark-complexioned people was not countenanced.²³ A number of precautions in sexual relations were prescribed in order to prevent the birth of defectives,

¹⁷B. B. 110b.

¹⁸Yebamoth 63b.

¹⁹Ibid. 64a.

²⁰Ibid 63b, 64a.

²¹Ibid 62b. Cf. Koheleth Rabbah 7, 8, also *Social Direction of Human Evolution*, p. 124, concerning pathological defects of first born and earlier members of the family.

²²Cf. Tur Eben Haezer ch. 25.

²³Bechoroth 45b.

such as lepers,²⁴ epileptics,²⁵ the deaf and the dumb, the lame and the blind.²⁶

V. Intelligent Love

Raba advised every young man not to marry a girl before he knew all about her immediate family, especially about her brothers, for "children usually inherit the traits of their mother's brothers."²⁷ "Take your time," counsels a Talmudic proverb, "before you ask a woman to be your wife";²⁸ in other words, "fall in love intelligently." Other well-known Rabbinic maxims are: "a man drinketh not out of a cup which he hath not inspected,"²⁹ and "a bride whose eyes are defective, ought to undergo a general physical examination."³⁰

In the opinion of Rabbi Jonathan both Eliezer, the servant of Abraham, and Saul, king of Israel, acted most indiscreetly by treating marriage in a rather frivolous manner. Eliezer said: "Behold the virgin which will say drink, and I will also draw for the camels, that is the woman whom the Lord hath appointed for my master's son." Suppose that woman had some physical defects, would she have been a suitable mate for Isaac? Similarly Saul proclaimed: "The man who killeth Goliath, the king will give him his daughter." If that man had been

²⁴Sifra, Mezora ch. 3.

²⁵Pesachim 112b.

²⁶Nedarim 20a.

²⁷B. B. 110a.

²⁸Yebamoth 63a.

²⁹Kethuboth 75b.

³⁰Shir Hashirim Rabbah 4, 1-3; cf. Taanith 24a.

a slave or possessed other hereditary defects, would Saul have sanctioned the marriage?³¹

VI. Non-Eugenic Marriages

The attempt to limit the multiplication of the undesirable elements in the Jewish race, resulted in three kinds of prohibitions. First, prohibition against the marriage of defectives by reason of heredity (*pesul yochesin*); secondly, the prohibition against the marriage of personal defectives (*debar shebagufon*); thirdly, the prohibition against consanguineous marriages (*ervah*).³²

Besides the prohibition against defective marriages mentioned in the Mosaic code,³³ the Talmud forbade one to marry into a confirmed leprous or epileptic family,³⁴ or to marry a woman who had buried three husbands.³⁵ The union between an old man and a young girl was condemned in unequivocal terms.³⁶ Persons or families manifesting continuous antagonism to each other were advised not to intermarry.³⁷ Great, in the eyes of the Rabbis, was the offense of him who married a woman from

³¹Taanith 4a.

³²Tur Eben Haezer, Piryah Veribyah, ch. 4.

³³Deuteronomy xxiii, 2.

³⁴Yebamoth 64a.

³⁵Niddah 64a. It is interesting to note that a late authority insists that the same rule should apply to a man who buried three wives. Cf. Beer Heteb to Eben Haezer, Ishoth 9, 2.

³⁶Sanhedrin 76a; cf. also Yebamoth 106b and Ruth Rabbah 3, 10.

³⁷Kiddushin 71b. Cf. *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, p. 8, where the suggestion is made that the curious antipathy of red-haired persons of the opposite sexes for each other, may be an eugenic antipathy.

an element classed among the unfit. His act was as reprehensible as if he had dug up every fertile field in existence and sown it with salt.³⁸ A quintuple transgression was his,³⁹ for which he will be bound hand and foot by Elijah, the great purifier,⁴⁰ and flogged by God himself. "Woe unto him who deteriorates the quality of his children and defiles the purity of his family," is the verdict of Elijah endorsed by God.⁴¹ On the other hand, the mating of two persons possessing unique and noble traits cannot but result in the establishment of superior and influential families.⁴² When God will cause his Shechinah to dwell in Israel, only such which scrupulously preserved the purity of their families, will be privileged to witness the manifestation of the Holy Spirit.⁴³

VII. Psychical Eugenics

The distinctive feature, however, of Jewish eugenics lies in the greater emphasis laid on the psychical well-being of posterity, in contradistinction to the merely physical well-being which is the chief concern of modern eugenists. At the Congress of Eugenics recently held at London, one of our modern eugenists, Professor Samuel C. Smith of the University of Minnesota, exclaimed: "If I were to choose my own father, I would rather have a

³⁸Kiddushin 70a.

³⁹Aboth Derabbi Nathan, ch. 26.

⁴⁰Cf. Kiddushin 71a.

⁴¹Kiddushin 70a.

⁴²Bamidbar Rabbah 3, 4.

⁴³Kiddushin 70b.

robust burglar than a consumptive bishop." The Rabbis, on the other hand, tell us that when the question came up whether or not the Gibeonites should be permitted to intermarry with the children of Israel, David tested them, in order to ascertain not so much their physical fitness but rather their psychical fitness, and found them wanting. He discovered that they did not possess the three "unit characters" peculiar to Israel, namely: sympathy, modesty and philanthropy. He therefore thought it eugenically inadvisable to allow their mating with a spiritually better-developed stock.⁴⁴ Rabbi Levi enumerates nine undesirable psychical qualities which ought to be eliminated from amongst the Jewish race.⁴⁵

VIII. Eugenics and Religion

The Jew took his spiritual mission as representing a "kingdom of priests and a holy kingdom" quite seriously, and used all possible eugenic means to preserve those rare emotional and spiritual qualities developed during centuries of slow progress and unfolding. Intuitively he felt the truth, so well expressed by a modern student of eugenics, that "Religion would be a more effective thing, if everybody had a healthy emotional nature; but it can do nothing with natures that have not the elements of love, loyalty and devotion."⁴⁶ The Rabbis would say: Religion can do nothing with natures that

⁴⁴Yebamoth 79a.

⁴⁵Nedarim 20b.

⁴⁶*Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, p. 255.

have not the elements of sympathy, modesty and philanthropy. Hence they urged that a man should be willing to offer all his possessions for the opportunity of marrying a member of a psychically well-developed family.⁴⁷

The marriage between the offspring of inferior stock and that of superior stock, such as the marriage between a scholar and the daughter of an *am-haarez*, or between an *am-haarez* and the daughter of a scholar, was considered extremely undesirable, and was condemned very strongly.⁴⁸ Moreover, no Rabbi or *Talmid Chacham* was allowed to take part in the celebration of such a non-eugenic union.⁴⁹

An historical case is cited by Rabbi Eliezer to prove that one should always select his soul-mate from amongst the spiritually better-developed families. Moses married a daughter of Jethro, a heathen priest, and the result was that one of his grandsons, Jonathan, became an idolatrous priest. Aaron, on the other hand, married the daughter of Abinadab, and history records the name of his grandson Phinehas as the hero who defended the honor and purity of Israel.⁵⁰

Parents living normal and righteous lives are not only a blessing to themselves, but also to their children and children's children, until the end of all generations; while parents living abnormal and

⁴⁷Pesachim 49b.

⁴⁸Kiddushin 49b; cf. also Pesachim 49b.

⁴⁹Pesachim 49b.

⁵⁰B. B. 109b.

immoral lives bring ruin and calamity not only on themselves, but also on their children and children's children, to the end of all generations.⁵¹

IX. Heredity

A parallel to the "rough eugenic ideal" of marrying "health, wealth and wisdom"⁵² is found in the words of Rabbi Akiba, who claims that "a father bequeaths to his child beauty, health, wealth, wisdom and longevity."⁵³ Similarly, ugliness, sickness, poverty, stupidity and the tendency to premature death, are transmitted from father to offspring.⁵⁴ Hence we are told that when Moses desired to know why some of the righteous suffer in health and material prosperity, while others prosper and reap success; and again, why some of the wicked suffer, while others enjoy success and material well-being; God explained that the righteous and wicked who thrive and flourish, are usually the descendants of righteous parents, while those who suffer and fail materially are the descendants of wicked parents.⁵⁵

X. Priceless Heritage

Thus the Rabbis recognized the fact that both physical and psychical qualities were inherited, and endeavored by direct precept and law, as well as by

⁵¹Yoma 87a.

⁵²*Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, p. 8.

⁵³Eduyoth 2, 9.

⁵⁴Yer. Kiddushin 1, 7.

⁵⁵Berachoth 7a.

indirect advice and admonition, to preserve and improve the inborn, wholesome qualities of the Jewish race. It is true that they were willing to concede that "a pure-bred individual may be produced by a hybrid mated with a pure bred," for they found examples of that nature in Ruth the Moabitess, Naamah the Ammonitess,⁵⁶ Hezekiah and Mordecai.⁵⁷ As a general eugenic rule, however, they maintained that one cannot produce "a clean thing out of an unclean," and discouraged any kind of intermarriage even with proselytes.⁵⁸ Their ideal was a race healthy in body and in spirit, pure and undefiled, devoid of any admixture of inferior human protoplasm.⁵⁹

Such an ideal, though apparently narrow and chauvinistic, has its eugenic value, as the following suggestive quotation from a well-known eugenicist clearly indicates. "Families in which good and noble qualities of mind and body have become hereditary, form a natural aristocracy; and if such families take pride in recording their pedigrees, marry among themselves, and establish a predominant fertility, they can assure success and position to the majority of their descendants in any political future. They can become the guardians and trustees of a sound inborn heritage, which, incorruptible and undefiled, they can preserve in purity and vigor throughout whatever period of ignorance and decay may be in

⁵⁶Yebamoth 63a.

⁵⁷Bamidbar Rabbah, Chukath ch. 19.

⁵⁸Pesachim 112b, Kiddushin 70b.

⁵⁹Yer. Kilayim ch. 1.

store for the nation at large. Neglect to hand on undimmed the priceless germinal qualities which such families possess, can be regarded only as a betrayal of a sacred trust."⁶⁶

⁶⁶See *Social Direction of Human Evolution*, p. 238.

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